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Schoolscapes
The Newsletter

Exploring Assessment and Evaluation

Eve Krakow

Tuesday morning's workshop at the March 12-13 session in Schoolscapes explored the issues of evaluation and assessment. In the English-language workshop, led by Abigail Anderson and Janet Rubenstein, participants began with a brief discussion on the difference between assessment and evaluation.

Assessment was described as an ongoing process where the teacher gathers information and gives feedback to the children. Evaluation was described as the moment when that information is interpreted and a judgment is made. The final step in the process is the reporting and communication of this information to the parent and the child.

"It is important to look at the distinction and relationships between these elements when discussing evaluation and assessment with your teachers," Anderson reminded the group.

Tools

In the first workshop activity, participants were to imagine that they were preparing for a meeting with the parents of a student. They worked individually to complete the statement: "Your child is making progress in (subject, subject-related competency or cross-curricular competency) because I have observed that (student's behaviours)."
This individual reflection led to the second activity where, working in teams, participants discussed what means teachers can use to ascertain that a child is making progress (procedures, evaluation focuses and evaluation tools), what means teachers can use to monitor the learning progress of a student or a group of students, and how they would define learning progress.

Teams were then given a package containing excerpts from various authors' works on the subject of evaluation and assessment. They were to discuss these and, if needed, revise some of their previous answers.

Concerns

While participants readily identified various procedures, tools and criteria, several concerns remained on how to make sure all bases are covered, and how to report this information.

For instance, in a report card, should a teacher focus on just a few key competencies? This may not give the parent an overall picture of how their child is progressing. "Parents want to see the same overall continuum that the teacher sees," said one participant. On the other hand, if a generalist is to focus on all competencies in all subjects, that's over forty competencies!

Another person pointed out that the cross-curricular competencies are, in fact, the "essential learning." So, one could argue, this is what teachers should be reporting on. But parents want to know how their child is doing in concrete areas like math and English.

Many concerns were also raised about the scales and continuums being developed for the competencies. "They should be used as a resource," said one participant, "but if teachers focus on them too much, they'll get bogged down and have no time to focus on the actual learning!"

Others worried about such divisions as "initiating, developing and consolidating" a competency. "A child can be developing a competency for a long time. But it doesn't mean they're standing still. I'm thinking in particular of my special needs kids." Conversely, another person pointed out, good students may start at the top of the scale, but that doesn't mean they have nowhere to go. What's more, "the more you learn, the less you know… you've never finished consolidating!"

During the discussions, participants also shared individual experiences at their own schools. One teacher talked about her successes and difficulties in getting her Cycle One students to do a self-assessment. She had devised a chart with smiley faces, and all seemed to be going very well—until she realized that kids were putting all their checkmarks in the same row! She had to modify her system and re-explain it to the children in smaller groups. "Hopefully, next term will go better," she said.

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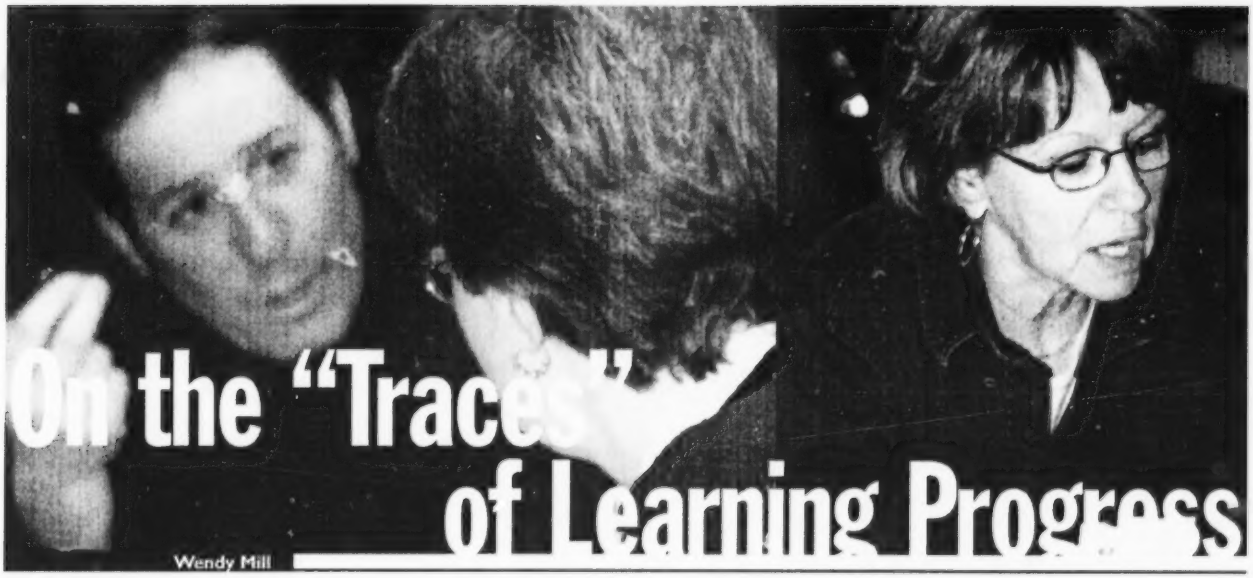

On the "Traces" of Learning Progress

Wendy Mill

During the afternoon of March 13, the English-language group continued on the theme of assessment and evaluation, as the group had not completed all the activities in the morning session and felt this was an issue they wanted to explore further. The afternoon activities focused on the "traces" used to monitor students' progress, as well as their implications for planning.

For the activity, workbooks prepared by Cycle One students on the growth patterns and uses of trees and whether they should be cut down were provided to the teams for assessment as traces. In fact, however, the teams did not complete the proposed activities. Most of the afternoon session was given over to an open discussion of the issues raised during the activities, and in this discussion, the workbooks served as a lightening rod for the positions of the various participants.

Two Perspectives

Two perspectives on assessment and evaluation emerged, although not all contributors to the discussion considered them mutually exclusive. Proponents of the first view consider that the focus should be entirely on a student's progress relative to an earlier level of skill or competency. They stress that in the past, we have too often compared children with other children. If, instead, they are measured in terms of their own performance over time, it may turn out that a student who performs well on standard tests has not actually improved very much. But, they say, teachers rarely take into account the student's evolution: often, they take an average of the results of all tests a student has done over a year.

Those who hold this view are generally opposed to end-of-cycle evaluation. However, the "individual progress" camp is divided concerning the ways to evaluate students' progress.

What Constitute Authentic Traces?

Some participants emphasize process and context, maintaining that "the end-product is not an adequate trace." According to this logic, looking at the workbook on trees is like looking at a snapshot: you lack the context that would make the evidence meaningful. To monitor students' learning, you have to be there with them; the experience is necessary. To produce a trace, you have to go through other activities. As one participant said, "We're looking at learning that shows over a two-year period, not just when you're ready to see it." "Contexts," said another, "are part of what students set for themselves."

Others thought that, on the contrary, the workbook about trees established interesting traces. One participant saw a child learning to do a timeline, and by looking at his writing over time, she could see his opinion about tree-cutting change, and his ability to support his opinion improve. Thus, the workbook provided her with traces for evaluating the cross-curricular competency "To use information." This participant also argued that it is possible to assess trace-data whether or not one knows a student, and that, at least with regard to subject content, the result is what counts. What teachers teach doesn't matter; the main thing is "whether the child learned to do it."

Another participant stressed that constructing a timeline about tree growth was meaningful to the student, who at least saw that trees grow a long time relative to himself. Someone else deduced from a graph about tree growth that the student understood the idea of the graph but could not accurately show which tree reaches what height in a given length of time. Here, the workbook provided a baseline for measuring the development of the competency "To communicate by using mathematical language."

Towards the end of the afternoon session, one participant tied the threads of the various contributions together by saying that the discussion of assessment showed there is a new attitude that supports students' self-esteem and celebrates mistakes as vital to learning. "In future," she said, "school will not lead us to downplay our interests or abilities because they were not validated." Another participant added, to warm applause, "this discussion doesn't support end-of-cycle evaluation."

Shoveling Information Down the Drain?

In reaction to the applause, Laurent Trudel of the Ministère de l'Éducation cautioned the participants against "shoveling information down the drain in the name of formative evaluation and progress." "On the provincial level," he said, "we need to measure performance against standards. At the end of the cycle, only the teacher can say that a given child has progressed, but we also have to know what the child can do in terms of standards."

This was the other major perspective represented in the workshop. Discussion (there was less, because this position was less popular) observed that not all children in a class are the same age; there is a 12-month span. This being the case, instead of end-of-cycle evaluation, perhaps we could test when children achieve a certain degree of development of a competency. Or we could test by age group within a class.

Another person said that standards-based testing is unfair ("Who do we think we are?") and that school is the only place that has a two-year cycle and tests an end-of-cycle competency level. "We only do it because we're accountable."

Another theme raised in the course of the afternoon concerned the need to monitor progress other than via writing. "It is not as simple as relying on language. How do we follow progress in math?" said one person, while another noted that "we also need information on the student's ability to communicate, to read, to collaborate with others." A suggestion with reference to mathematics was for students to keep a learning or thinking log to track their own understanding. A response to the second comment noted that you can look at writing—or mathematics—on two levels, as a skill, and in terms of the development of other skills, such as critical judgment, reflection, and so on.

Judging from this discussion, it seems clear that assessment and evaluation continue to be hot issues, and that many people in the education community feel that standards-based, end-of-cycle evaluation flies in the face of everything the educational reform stands for.

Overview of the Workshops

INVITED TO ATTEND THE WORKSHOPS AS OBSERVERS DURING THE TWO-DAY TRAINING SESSION, MONIQUE BOUCHER, MARTHE VAN NEST AND PIERRETTE JALBERT BASED THEIR SUMMARY OF THE THEMES ADDRESSED DURING THE MEETINGS ON THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE PARTICIPANTS.

Pascale Sauvé

Integrating the cultural dimension

Monique Boucher, the editor of the magazine *Vie pédagogique*, introduced her remarks by observing, "It is easy to see that the marriage of culture and curriculum is one union that will not end in divorce." The intense discussions among participants in the workshop on the cultural dimension in the *Québec Education Program* rapidly convinced her of that.

It was recognized in the course of the workshops that the organization, aims and content of the new *Québec Education Program* offer many opportunities to integrate the cultural dimension. And that the QEP is itself a cultural object. "However, that alone will not provide students with an education that has a truly cultural perspective, which would both make their learning more meaningful and favour the transfer of learning," noted Boucher. "Culture is above all a question of attitude."

"Culture is not located primarily in the programs; it resides in the teachers, who embody it, share it, and make it come alive by showing how it can answer our questions, satisfy our need to understand and our search for meaning," wrote Denis Simard in the issue of *Vie pédagogique* on the integration of the cultural dimension in the schools. "So it is by coming in contact with cultivated adults that the students themselves will develop positive attitudes towards culture."

"We all remember how some teachers were better able than others to broaden our horizons and allow us to discover realities and worlds we hardly knew existed," remarked Monique Boucher. "These educators knew how to stimulate our interests, or even kindle our passions. They understood how to influence their students." However, according to Boucher, integrating the cultural dimension into students' learnings should figure among the pedagogical practices of every educator, so that the entire school participates in the development of cultivated men and women.

What are the signs of a cultivated person? To support her suggestion, Boucher cited the definition proposed by Olivier Reboul in his book *Les valeurs de l'éducation*: "A cultivated person is one who asks questions and who questions himself or herself." Viewed in these terms, culture cannot be considered a luxury reserved for an elite or a component of certain subjects only. "The challenges and the major social, moral and environmental issues facing society today and in the near future require that cultural perspectives be integrated into all of the learning situations that students experience," insisted Boucher.

Does one have to be extremely cultured to teach from a cultural perspective? If so, how can this challenge be met?" According to Boucher, "teaching from a cultural perspective is more a matter of being willing to work, both on one's own and with one's students, at trying to gain a sense of the remote or recent past, in order to better understand the present and prepare for the future. If teachers do this, they will surely provide effective role-models."

Monique Boucher agrees that what she advocates is easier said than done! During the workshops, several interesting ways to support and encourage such involvement were nonetheless suggested: developing and implementing educational projects that truly reflect a concern for the school's cultural enrichment, relying on team work; calling on the skills and cultural knowledge of colleagues and other school staff members; promoting greater openness to the school's immediate surroundings, to parents and to the community; providing initial teacher training that includes this perspective so that future teachers learn to present culture in a way that pleases students; providing professional development suited to the needs of school staff; taking students on field trips involving cultural activities and encouraging teachers

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Pascale Sauvé

The development of the competencies in a cycle

In preparing her summary of the workshop on the development of the competencies in a cycle, Marthe Van Nest, Ministère de l'Éducation consultant and professor at the Université de Sherbrooke, asked herself the following question: Is it possible to avoid having the learning cycles become an empty shell? In other words: how can we make the cycles meaningful and ensure that they help the school to perform its role?

The suggestions and comments made during the workshops led Marthe Van Nest to the following conclusion: "We have only just begun to examine this question. Implementing this new system of learning cycles will require a long, gradual process of adaptation." She underscored two challenges that schools must meet at the present time in order to successfully handle the transition to learning cycles.

The first challenge concerns a team's ability to affirm its collective responsibility for helping students along the path towards the development of competencies. She made four suggestions related to this challenge.

First of all, each and every staff member must understand why there are cycles and why the team has to work together. "It is essential for everyone to grasp the underlying logic of cycles, and to have a very clear shared definition, articulated in similar words," maintained the professor. Having considered this question at length, Marthe Van Nest put forward a suggestion that can serve as a starting point for the establishment of a shared vision of the learning cycle. "To me, the learning cycle exists because competency-based education takes time. Learners need time to develop competencies, but those responsible for ensuring that students learn must also invest a great deal of time. This type of education is complex and ongoing, and therefore cannot depend on the efforts of a single person. This is why it is important that all school staff work together for the benefit of their students in order to understand the many facets of this process and identify the measures the team can take to contribute to the development of these competencies and to their evaluation."

A second suggestion was that all team members work together to achieve the goal of student success. To this end, Marthe Van Nest estimates that cycle teams must go beyond the level of discussion, respectful listening and mutual encouragement. They must go one step further, by "establishing a system of collective action in which decision-making and coordination activities are transparent and in which each person has an element of professional autonomy," she said.

The third suggestion consists in exercising intelligent collegiality. "Cooperating doesn't mean holding hands all the time," Van Nest explained. "Avoiding the pitfalls of individualism definitely does not entail going to the opposite extreme by insisting on team activities all the time, without even understanding why." Intelligent collegiality involves recognizing the professional autonomy of each member, which means alternating between concerted teamwork and the delegation of work responsibilities to individuals. In this way, you have an ideal situation in which the needs, strengths and interests of each member of the team are taken into account. "In the exercise of intelligent collegiality, it is evident that power relations are redefined within what may be called a new style of cooperative leadership, and that the resulting situation, far from diluting the members' responsibilities and paralyzing decision-making, will strengthen both," says Van Nest. "But the new leadership will be characterized by a profound conviction that we are stronger when we work together."

Van Nest's fourth suggestion is that team members should expand their range of professional competencies. "More than ever, the professional competency of every team member becomes an essential element of student learning." Teachers have to be professionals who are capable of taking appropriate action in emergencies, when there are many unknowns, and when faced with familiar scenarios, in keeping with their goals. "Professionals know how to use their resources in complex situations," she explained. "Professional teachers are also able to transpose their knowledge by taking a step back, developing models, and knowing how to identify and interpret indicators in different contexts. They know how to learn and help others learn, and how to get involved and take risks, guided by ethical principles."

Awareness

According to Marthe Van Nest, the second challenge facing schools is doubtless that of enabling all their students to recognize, as individuals, what they are creating for themselves. She offered four suggestions.

The first is for the students to establish a real relationship to knowledge, which means that they must start with their own questions if they are to make their own discoveries. "This will require that teachers stop second-guessing students' questions and answering them before the students formulate them. In addition, teachers have to do as little as possible, knowing that the rest will come from the students, in good time, perhaps less coherently than if the teacher had articulated it, but in response to a real need. It may require focusing on the acquisition of fewer learnings, but learnings constructed and mastered by the

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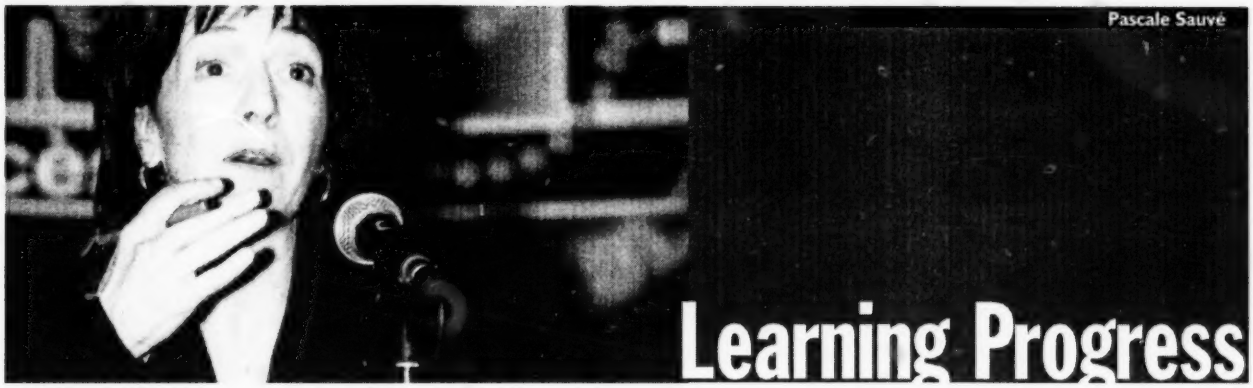

Pascale Sauvé

Learning Progress

How can learning progress be monitored? Simply asking this question during a workshop brought one obvious fact to light: evaluation is no longer a tool used to certify students' success or failure, but rather a means of helping them develop competencies.

This was the first conclusion reached by those who participated in the workshop on learning progress within a cycle. What can be done to ensure that evaluation does, in fact, help students develop competencies? Pierrette Jalbert, an evaluation specialist and consultant to the Ministère de l'Éducation, discussed the major challenges related to this question.

To begin with, Ms. Jalbert emphasized the importance of adopting evaluation practices that are consistent with the characteristics of a competency. "These characteristics must be read and reread, since they will influence our practices," she noted. What are these characteristics? First of all, a competency is comprehensive. "This means that we must evaluate a competency as a whole and not focus on each of its components in isolation," Jalbert added. A competency is complex. In defining what constitutes learning progress, a teacher must use various tools to bring every facet of a competency into play. A competency is also interactive and must be related to the context in which it is used. "It is therefore important to evaluate and observe students in different contexts," she explained. Lastly, a competency is progressive in that it is developed over time.

"A competency is linked to the different stages of learning, which means that if we are to monitor learning progress, we must gather information on a daily basis and not simply at the end of a given stage," Jalbert noted. By observing students while they work and interact with others, by asking them questions, by analyzing their work and by recording traces of these observations, teachers can monitor their students' learning progress.

Keeping a record of traces

It seems obvious that teachers must identify ways of monitoring learning progress. One way of doing this is to keep a record of traces. These can be gathered through on-the-spot observation and then compiled. They can also be produced using more formal evaluation tools. "There is a great demand for tools," Jalbert noted. "It's reassuring to have these tools when you start working with a new program, but you have to remember that a tool must be useful."

What is a good tool? Pierrette Jalbert described some of the conditions for determining whether a tool is worthwhile. First, it should be a memory aid that both student and teacher can consult at any time. The tool should allow you to make adjustments. Students can refer to it in order to anticipate what they must do before carrying out a task, to modify what they are doing as they go along, and to eventually assess the final product. "In order to be useful, a tool need not be used with every student or throughout the cycle," Jalbert remarked. "It should evolve over time because the competencies are developed during the cycle."

Teachers collect and record information every day without knowing what it all means at first glance. "At a certain point, it's important to stop and analyze this information," Jalbert said. Teachers have to stop to see if they have enough traces to interpret this information. They must also ensure that they have enough traces pertaining to the same competencies or the same types of knowledge to be able to monitor the student's progress. "Ideally, the traces should also be connected to a teaching, learning or evaluation context. In other words, how were things organized and what were the requirements?" Jalbert remarked. In order to evaluate the student's progress, it is also important to compare the information gathered at different points in the learning process. At the same time, the teacher must keep in mind the end-of-cycle expectations to ascertain whether students are close to reaching the various targets or whether they still have a long way to go. "This work is far from easy, yet it is already being done. However, the time has come to systematize this approach," Jalbert noted. "This involves qualitative analysis. The student's strengths and weakness must be identified. It is important to summarize the information to avoid compiling a checklist of what the student is able to do. It should always be remembered that the objective is to determine whether the student has developed a competency in its entirety."

This analysis will make it possible for the teacher to identify typical problems and mistakes. "Another challenge is to change our attitude toward mistakes, which are often seen as failings or a deviation from the norm," Jalbert said. "If we want to be able to monitor learning progress, mistakes must be regarded in a more positive light. They can be examined with the student alone or with the entire class, with a view to helping the student make progress." Viewing mistakes positively usually fosters differentiation in terms of learning experience.

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The student's involvement

Students will receive even more valuable help in developing their competencies if we encourage their active involvement. They should be encouraged to examine the resources used during learning situations, to put them in perspective and to ask themselves questions in order to achieve more self-awareness on an affective and cognitive level. "We often talk about self-evaluation and with good reason. While it is important to have an evaluation form that allows us to determine whether or not a student has succeeded or whether or not he /she liked the work, this alone is not enough," Jalbert noted. "It has to be more dynamic. When students try to understand what happened, to understand how they learn and that they are engaged in a learning process, they must be in a genuine self-evaluation situation."

Pierrette Jalbert described some of the essential conditions for getting students to ask themselves questions. For example, create an atmosphere that encourages discussion among classmates so that they can share their doubts, their successes, their problems and so on. When students are required to find solutions to a problem, their classmates can be just as valuable a resource as the teacher is. "Students should also have the opportunity to ask themselves questions, but there must also be some measure of consistency in everything we do and in all the tools we use, be it checklists, verbal feedback, comments in the report card and so on."

All in all, to monitor learning progress, teachers themselves must develop certain competencies. Among other things, they must learn how to observe, to master the art of asking questions, to keep a record of significant traces, to interpret the information gathered and to get students involved so that they can really play an active part in a learning project.

"We aren't looking to meet all the challenges by tomorrow, because we are faced with an enormous task," Jalbert noted. "For the moment, it's important to recognize that these challenges are related to an overall long-term development goal." ■

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to make use of their cultural knowledge to improve their teaching and help students develop competencies.

"Once again, these are only suggestions, and the various schools will surely develop other ways as they discover the power of culture, its capacity to make learnings meaningful, and its resulting contribution to students' motivation and success," explained Boucher. The discussion on the integration of the cultural dimension in education is under way, but there remains much to say and to discover on this subject, for example concerning the evaluation of students' cultural competency. "This issue raises many questions and requires further reflection and great prudence," warned Boucher. In seeking to take stock of students' progress in this area, we must avoid the pitfall of a linear outlook that could easily lead us to conceive of success in terms of a set of static cultural learnings."

Despite the challenges involved in the genuine integration of the cultural dimension into the life of the school, Boucher has no doubt that the project will succeed. "I am convinced that we must have confidence in schools and above all in teachers, and that teachers will prove equal to the challenge of truly integrating culture into the life of their schools, because for most teachers, culture is part and parcel of their very concept of education."

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students themselves." Under these conditions, teachers must avoid the temptation to display their erudition.

Establishing a real relationship to knowledge also implies proposing learning situations that students can shape or play an active role in, so that the situations motivate them. "This means that teachers must leave the planning sketchy in order to allow students room for intellectual exploration."

Students should also be encouraged to change their approach and try different ways of learning, as Perrenoud has suggested. "The competency-based educational process will require more from the student than the desire to do well, to please or to stay out of trouble," Van Nest said. To become competent, students have to become involved in confronting problems and in problem solving. By highlighting students' contribution—or lack thereof—to the collective effort, this insistence on genuine involvement breaks with the individualistic approach to school and develops students' persistence over the long term and their sense of accountability to themselves and others.

To enable students to become aware of what they have learned, teachers can no longer avoid differentiated teaching. "Differentiation is a way of approaching teaching and learning that leads teachers to rethink their practices on the basis of three questions: Who am I teaching? How do my students need to learn? What sort of classroom atmosphere do my students need?" explained Van Nest.

"In conclusion, it seems to me that this whole question of cycles underscores the need for consistency and continuity from one class to the next," she suggested. It certainly involves cooperation among adults, but also my own consistency in my relationship with knowledge and culture. It also depends on my ability to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty, to take risks and to have confidence in the students so that I gear my teaching to the learners rather than to the Program." ■

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